Sept 1971

C1 [redacted]

SOUNDLESS IN SOLITARY

An utterly silent cell, first devised by the Chinese for brainwashing, may have dramatic potential for medical cures and mental expansion

by Colin Wilson

25X1A

[redacted]

25

The quietest place in the world is not the middle of the Sahara desert on a still day, or the top of Mount Everest; it is a basement room in a building at Princeton University, New Jersey, with walls so carefully padded and insulated that no sound or vibration can penetrate. When the light is turned off, it is like being in outer space. It is known as "the black room". It is also the most powerful instrument for brain washing ever devised.

The American composer John Cage told me an interesting story about the black room. When he spent a few hours in the one at Harvard, he was surprised that he could still hear noises. When he came out, he asked the engineer what they were. "Describe them", said the engineer. "One was a high-pitched whining, the other a low rumbling." "The whining noise was the sound of your nervous system. The rumbling was the sound made by the blood in your veins."

The Nazis were fond of using solitary confinement to soften up political prisoners. When used on intelligent prisoners, it was often more effective than torture. Stalin added various psychological refinements to extort "public confessions" during the mass trials in the mid-1930s. But it seems to have been the Chinese who first grasped the potential of the black room for "brainwashing". They even invented the word (*hsi' nao* – wash-brain) to describe their attempts to indoctrinate prisoners during the Korean war. (I suspect they have some psychological genius working for the military, because they also made another amazing discovery during the Korean war: that exactly 5% of all prisoners had leader-qualities. If you removed that 5% from the rest of the prisoners, the other 95% became so docile and tractable that they could be left without guards, and no one would try to escape. This discovery helps to explain why there were almost no escapes of prisoners during the Korean war.)

All this is still top-secret material, and since I do not have the confidence of the C.I.A. I am not sure when the Chinese found out about the black room. But at some point they seem to have made the discovery that if prisoners were placed in total darkness and silence, they softened up very quickly, and became altogether more "persuadable". The Canadian Defense Research Board asked one of the most eminent of modern psychologists, Donald Hebb, to investigate the question. And so the first "black box" was set up at McGill University in Montreal. Hebb's black box was misnamed, because it was actually lit; a more correct term is "anechoic chamber" (from a Greek word meaning deafness). And it was at this point that Princeton decided to go the whole hog, and build a black room so efficient that it would have shut out the sound of a steam hammer working right outside, or a jet taking off.

A CRAVING VANISHES

Most of the room is occupied by a bed. There is also a lavatory, and some kind of a safe containing food and drink. Students were paid to come and sleep in it, and describe what it was like. And almost immediately, some curious paradoxes began to appear. Most people would fall asleep fairly quickly, and sleep for a long time—sometimes 40 hours or more. When they woke up, they usually felt fine—in fact, better than they had felt in years. Three people who went into the black room with bad colds came out two days later without the slightest trace of a cold. Two men suffering from poison ivy sores were cured in about the same period of time; what is more, they seem to have experienced no temptation to scratch themselves. Habitual heavy smokers found that they experienced no craving for a cigarette in the black room.

For some reason not fully understood, the black room can cure minor illness in a remarkably short time; illnesses that would normally last for a week may disappear in as little as 10 hours. To some extent, this may be due to the silence; most people never experience total rest during their whole adult life. The black room allows even the subconscious to go to sleep. But apart from that, it also seems likely that total silence has a kind of shock effect. It seems so *strange*, so eerie, that old habits forget to nag.

STAYING POWER AND STUPIDITY

And now comes one of the oddest paradoxes. Stupid people can stand the black room for longer than intelligent people. In fact, some intelligent people found it all so unnerving that they pressed the "panic button" within the first 10 minutes. Even those who managed to stay in found it all unexpectedly nerve-wracking. It was fine for the first few hours: they lay there and thought about all kinds of things, and most subjects found they could think far more clearly in the black room. (These initial effects were so good that students would go into the black room just before exams, because they found that it clarified the mind and enabled them to recall everything they'd learned during the semester.) But everybody knows what happens when you've been thinking well for an hour or two—perhaps setting out on a train journey or a long drive: a point comes when the brain gets tired. You want to relax, to get up and go for a coffee, switch on the radio, pick up a newspaper. In the black room, you just have to lie there. And the mind goes grinding on, recalling W. B. Yeats's phrase about "the old mill of the mind, consuming its rag and bone". It is impossible to switch it off. You can't go to sleep, because you've just slept for twice as long as usual. Besides, you're not physically tired. And this is the point where the panic begins to build up. It is like lying awake with insomnia, when your left foot itches, and you scratch it, and then the right foot itches, then the itch moves up to your knee, then your back...

AT THE MERCY OF YOUR MIND

It is clear why stupid people can stand the black room longer than intelligent people: intelligent people have greater powers of auto-suggestion. Instead of taking it all calmly, they began to worry and develop nervous tensions. (Do you notice that now I am talking about itching, you are beginning to itch . . . ?) Some of them became convinced that the temperature regulator had gone wrong, and the room was getting hotter and hotter. At which point, they reached for the panic button.

Oddly enough, animals don't seem to mind the black room at all; they just lie there, and sleep, and wonder what the hell it's all about...

Now it should be clear why the black room is so effective in brainwashing. *Because it leaves you completely at the*

continued

[redacted]

25X1A

mercy of your own mind. The two men suffering from poison-ivy rash said they didn't mind the itching, because it gave them something to think about besides the awful monotony of silence and darkness. If you stay in the black room long enough, it destroys the mind with boredom. Because boredom, if you think about it, is a condition of tension. If you are on a long train journey, a point comes where you lose interest in the scenery and the magazines, and even in the dining-car. You just wish you were already at your destination. You tap your feet, you yawn, you walk out in the corridor, and as the hours drag by, you get a feeling of constipation. Not just physical constipation, but a feeling that the mind itself is beginning to seize up. (Physical constipation often *does* result, and I suspect this is a matter of the mind influencing the body.)

This is why the black room is so terrifyingly effective as a brain-washer. It amplifies ordinary boredom into a condition of agony. Even in the friendly circumstances of laboratory research, it is bad enough. But if a man felt himself surrounded by hostility in an enemy country, it would become worse than physical pain. Under such strains, the mind would begin to drift apart, like a raft on a rough sea. The art of brain-washing is to catch the subject before the damage is too serious. A few friendly words from the interrogator, the soothing assurance that everything is going to be alright, and the prisoner is eager to tell everything he knows...

Ever since I learned about these experiments in the early 1960s, I have been fascinated by the black room problem. The reasons had nothing to do with politics or brainwashing. I had always been obsessed by the men I called "Outsiders", people who felt strangely unsuited to society. I predicted that Outsider figures would become more and more numerous in the 20th century: that is, there would be an increasing number of people not actually talented or original enough to make their own terms with society, yet who feel as out-of-place in it as any man of genius. Such people experience appalling mental strain; they feel alienated, miserable; out-of-step, yet they lack the confidence of genius. My analyses suggested that there was no point in these people trying to forget their alienness and join the herd; that was tantamount to mental suicide. They had to somehow find ways of becoming stronger, standing on their own feet. There is no way back for the "in-betweener", only forward.

JAMES BOND WOULD BREAK UP

And that immediately raised the question of what such people could *do* to become stronger. A couple of hundred years ago, the answer might have been a monastery, but that solution is no longer practicable.

As soon as I read about the black room experiments, I saw that they were attacking the same problem. The qualities the Outsider needs to survive are the qualities needed to survive in the black room: a mental toughness and self-sufficiency, the refusal to panic. And this in turn suggested a fascinating idea: that if black rooms were as common as psychiatrists' consulting rooms, "Outsiders" could train themselves to stay in them for longer and longer periods, and could develop the kind of strength they need to cease to be alienated misfits. The black room might become the 20th century equivalent of the monastery, but altogether more effective.

But the central problem remained: how could you train a man to withstand the black room? You can train a man to become *physically* tough by putting him through a commando assault course. But that depends on a series of *challenges*. The black room is an anti-challenge: pure monotony. A James Bond would go to pieces in the black room within a few days. An Einstein or a Beethoven would stand a better chance of surviving it.

12 DAYS IS THE LIMIT

I used the problem as the center of a novel—called *The Black Room*. The situation is as follows: somewhere in central Europe, a spying organization has been brainwashing spies from both sides—east and west—and using them as double agents. All the intelligence networks of the world are anxious to find them and destroy them. The ideal method would be to train their own men to withstand the black room, and hope that the enemy will kidnap one of them and try to brainwash him in a black room. The spy will pretend they have succeeded; but when he escapes, he will be in a position to betray the brainwashers. There is only one problem—there is no known method of training anybody to withstand the black room. *Anybody*—even an Einstein or Beethoven—would lose his reason after about a week.

I talked about the problem with the remarkable American psychologist Abraham Maslow—who died last year. Maslow believed that man's creative and religious impulses are as natural and *instinctive* as his sexual urges, and that if any political ideology is going to work, it must treat men as decent, intelligent creatures with higher needs. Maslow told me that the reason most intelligent people go to pieces in the black room is that they tend to be more neurotic and self-divided than stupid people. The black room acts as a kind of wedge, widening the gap of self-division. But Maslow had discovered that if you take intelligent but unneurotic people—the kind of highly creative people he called self-actualizers—they can sometimes stand the black room for as long as 12 days. He admitted that 12 days was the limit. But it was a beginning—and a pretty remarkable one at that.

My super-spy would obviously have to be an intelligent man, as well as creative. For that reason, I chose a composer. The next question was: how would you train him to develop his natural resistance to the black room?

The philosopher Gurdjieff made a useful distinction between "personality" and "essence" in human beings. Actors possess personality, but they are often weaklings. On the other hand, Gurdjieff said that one of the most remarkable men he ever met was a Corsican brigand, who spent hours in the sun every day, peering down the sights of a rifle, waiting for motor-cars; he possessed real "essence" according to Gurdjieff. Essence is what you need to survive the black room—a kind of rock-like core of strength that cannot be eroded by boredom.

This suggested the beginning of a solution. The black room induces a kind of *forgetfulness*. If you could devise a black room that has a sense of urgency, of danger, you'd train the mind to stay alert. For example, suppose you buried a man in a coffin, with a limited air supply, and warned him that if he forgot himself and took a few deep breaths, he'd die of suffocation before he could be dug up. Or suppose you placed a man on a narrow, sloping ledge on a mountain side, with a sheer drop below, so that he had to stay absolutely still *and* wide awake, or slide off? This kind of thing would force the mind to stay alert, to develop a kind of instinctive danger signal when it started to wander.

DRUGS IN TRAINING

And there are less disagreeable possibilities. Most healthy men are attracted by the opposite sex. If your training center contained a number of pretty girls, all deeply interested in the result of the training, the men would develop another kind of alertness—the kind that keeps a cat wide awake when it is watching a mouse...

Another possibility also derives from Maslow. He made the interesting discovery that most healthy people have sudden experiences of intense delight, a kind of bubbling-over of sheer affirmation. He called these "peak experiences". And in certain experiments made under his supervision, peak experiences were used to cure neurotics. One of the most remarkable experiments was with chronic alcoholics. Maslow reasoned that a man becomes an alcoholic when he gets run-down and stops having peak experiences. He drinks heavily because alcohol some-

continued

Approved For Release 1999/09/07 : CIA-RDP78-04491A000100090002-3

times induces a peak experience. Of course, more often it doesn't . . . The experimenters chose intelligent alcoholics, who had once been capable of enjoying poetry, music, natural scenery. The alcoholic was given a large dose of a psychedelic drug—mescalin or LSD—and then "peak experiences" were induced by means of music, poetry and so on. The cure rate was well over 50%. And the reason should be obvious. The alcoholic had got into a defeated state of mind in which no effort seemed worth making: hence the alcoholism. The tremendous experience of ecstasy induced under the drug—an overwhelming feeling of *meaning*—simply gave the alcoholic a reason for fighting. He would see, in a flash of sheer insight, that the peak experience is directly related to health and vital purpose. And though he was boozing to induce peak experiences, he was actually running away from them as fast as he could go.

Follow-up studies done years later often showed that these character changes were permanent. The alcoholic is proceeding on mistaken assumptions; once he sees that they are mistaken, he avoids repeating the mistake.

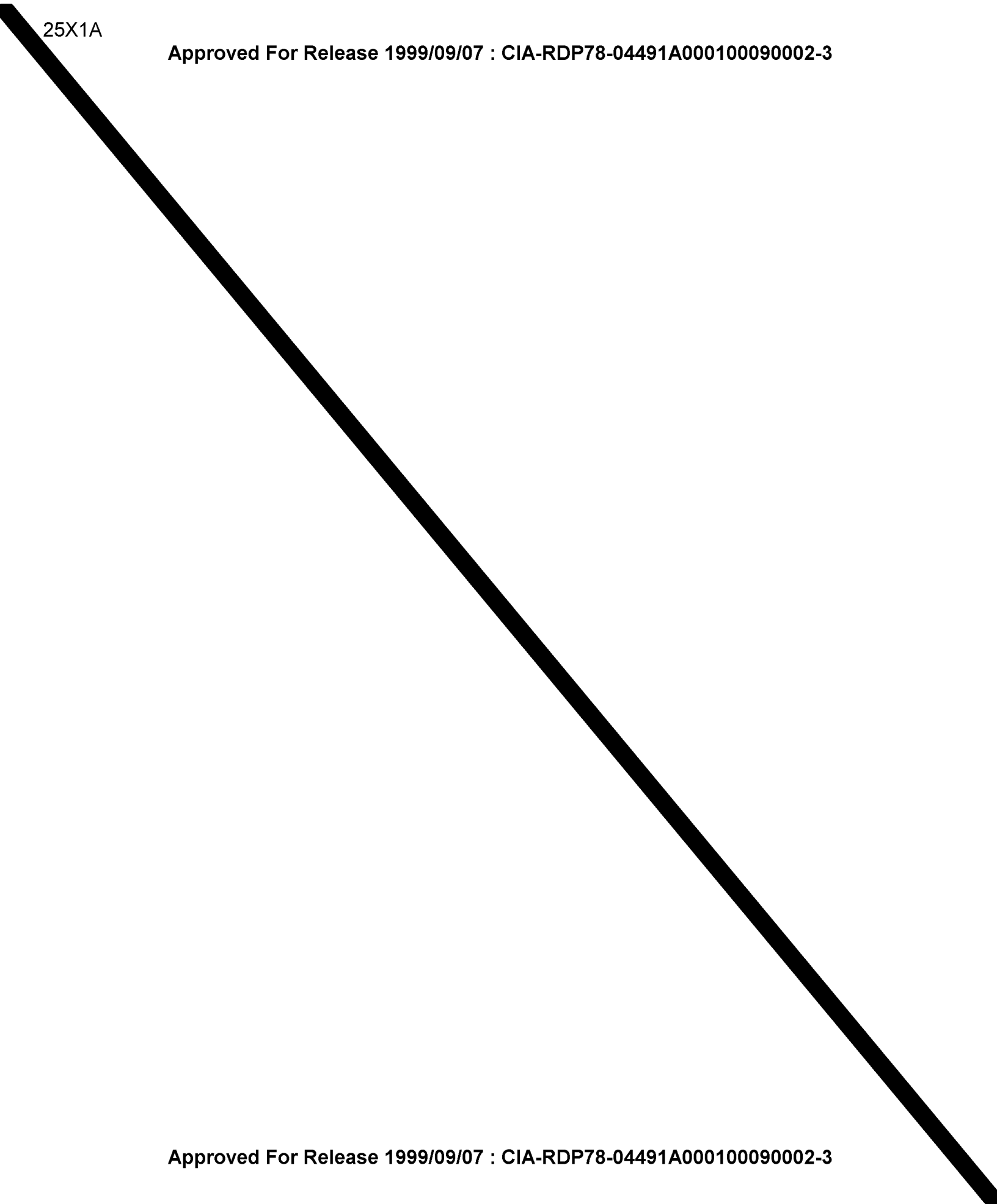
The interesting thing about all this is that beyond a certain point a feeling of health seems to induce still greater health. Like a mountain-climber, the healthy man enjoys it so much that he goes on looking for bigger peaks to conquer. And this, it seems to me, is probably the most promising direction for the conquest of the black room. Psychedelic drugs can be dangerous; but in carefully controlled circumstances, with the right surroundings and the right suggestions given by the psychiatrist, they may be able to induce conditions of ecstasy such as were described by saints. Or no, let me qualify that. The drug itself doesn't "induce" the ecstasy; it only starts the process. Imagination and will do the rest. (In the case of the alcoholics, the peak experience literally shakes the sleeping will into a state of wakefulness.) It is not the drug that is important, but the enormous vistas, the horizons of possibility, that open up when the mind escapes the bondage of old habits.

NEUROSIS AND SUPERMEN

One thing should be apparent. If we could devise ways of training people to withstand the black room, we would not only have found a powerful instrument for the cure of neurosis; we would also have found a way of creating supermen. And this may not be as far off as it sounds. John Cage told me that the Aerospace Medical Laboratory in Ohio—where astronauts are trained to get used to the silence of space—has an anechoic chamber deep underground; and that some people, far from going to pieces, had experiences of mystical ecstasy there. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to give me further details. Jack Vernon, in his book about black rooms, mentions a Turk who expected to be arrested (for political reasons), when he got back home and thrown into solitary confinement; he actually enjoyed the Princeton black room because it showed him he could stand it after all. In other words, his *attitude* towards it somehow made it pleasant instead of boring.

Psychology has only touched the fringes of discoveries that could transform the horizons of human consciousness. And I mean that in the most practical, down-to-earth sense.

O+—□



Approved For Release 1999/09/07 : CIA-RDP78-04491A000100090002-3